

Are Children's Parents their Worst Enemies?

Madame de St. Point, Distinguished Social Philosopher and Poetess, Makes an Ingenious Argument That We Should Take the Education and Control of Children Entirely Away from Parents to Secure Their Highest Development

By Madame Valentine de St. Point
the Brilliant Parisian Poetess,
Grandniece of the Great Lamartine.

THE child has in nearly all ages been regarded as a thing belonging exclusively to its family, to those who have brought it into the world. It seems to parents that the normal and natural act of giving life to a being secures to them the exclusive property of that being, to which they accord no serious rights and from which they expect every duty.

This is a traditional human error which has brought untold misery and degradation upon the human race, and which I feel it to be my most solemn duty to combat with all my strength.

Up to the present the father has been the head of the family, ruling sometimes his wife, but especially his children, crushing them very frequently under a tyrannical yoke. The conception of the ancient Hebrew patriarch and the Roman Paterfamilias has dominated modern society to its sorrow up to our day. This hard paternal yoke is regrettable because it annihilates the personality of the child. The independent children who seek to escape from it are not only pursued by the anger or curses of the father, but often, even, by legal powers which are at the command of the head of the family.

In our days paternal rights have been somewhat restricted, although in every civilized country the law gives theoretical control of the father over his children up to the age of twenty-one. Our inherited ideas of the paternal authority also give the father an enormous power, which varies considerably according to locality, and is perhaps greater in France than in America.

In earlier generations the father had the power of condemning his son to life-long disgrace for some trifling escapade, and this idea is still strong with us.

The perils of a disobedient son are less grave than they used to be, although with us the father still possesses the atrocious power of destroying the youth of the son by shutting him up in a house of correction until his majority.

The Father Ruins His Son's Mind and Body

Thus the law, which no longer recognizes a father's right to kill his offspring as in Roman times, still gives him the right to destroy his mind and body to a considerable degree. The father can deprive his son of everything that makes life worth living. He can condemn him to live with harsh and degraded persons, and all that simply for some boyish escapade. Usually the children thus punished had only shown some independence and lack of discipline, which are often marks of a strong character, which would later make them develop into capable citizens. This power, conferred upon one human being to tyrannize over another being in process of formation, who should receive every respect and every consideration, is a social infamy.

Side by side with the father's power, affirmed by law, another menace to the birth is the more or less occult influence of the mother.

For the ordinary mother, the child is a fragile toy which can never be surrounded with too much care and love. It is a hot-house plant over which she must watch incessantly, both physically and morally. She envelops the child in a network of tenderness—gentle, subtle, tenuous—in which it grows weak. Its natural daring, its youthful recklessness, is hampered. It is restrained when it should expand. What the father does not command the mother obtains by entreaty.

The proof of this is that in later life, when adult persons are brought to a condition of misery or weakness, the image of the mother appears to their weakened minds and even the word "mother" usually comes to their lips.

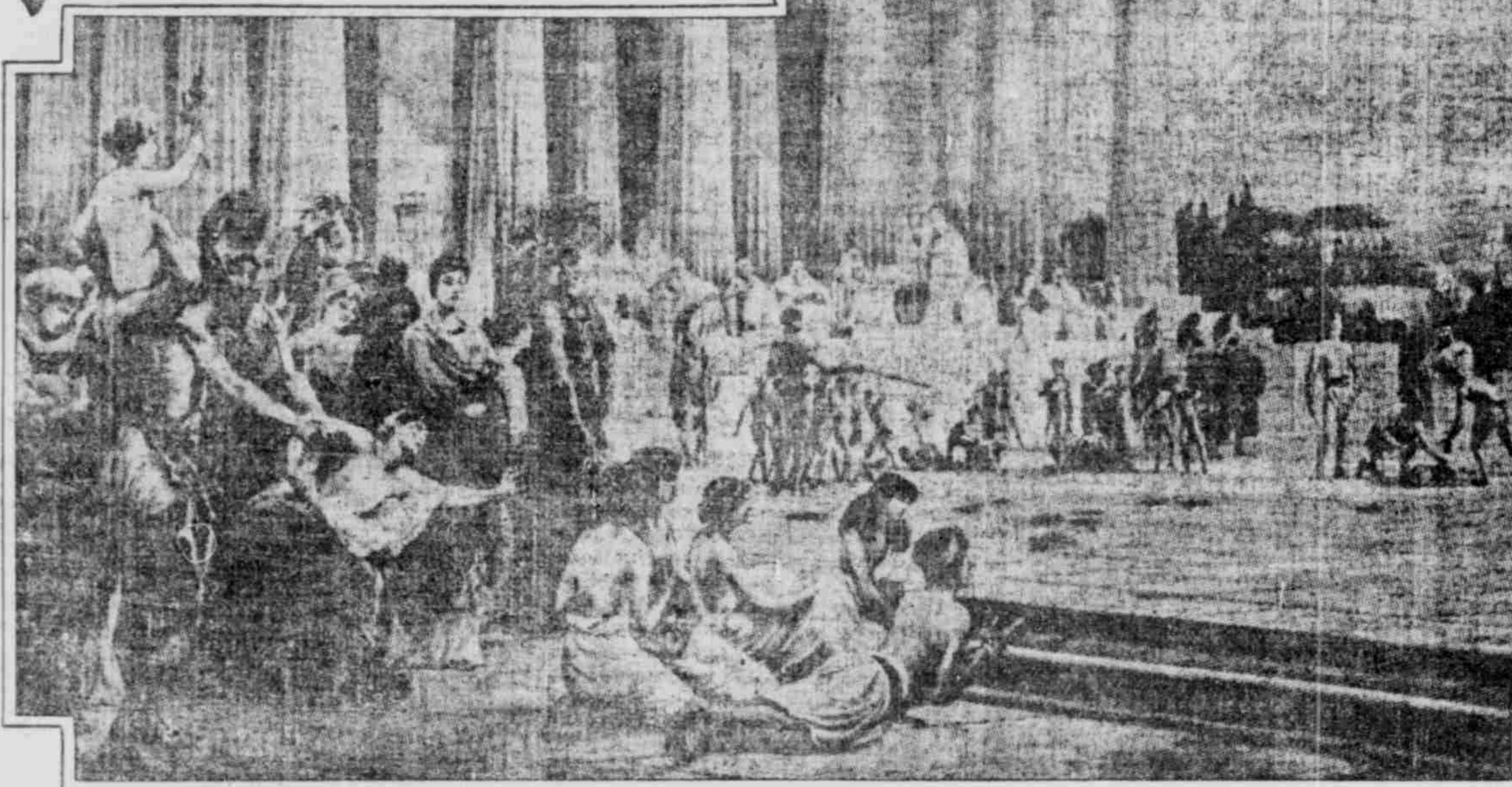
How well is our French conception of motherly tenderness illustrated by that favorite picture, "Madame Vigee Le Brun and Her Child," by herself. It is a beautiful picture, but it reveals marvellously the clinging parasitic type of motherly love, which holds its child so closely as almost to choke it, and which is really one of the greatest moral weaknesses of our nation.

Thus parents, in different ways, abuse their artificial rights over their children, without recognizing any other obligation than to keep them alive and to choose a calling for them. The majority of parents even seem to regard these

"Madame Vigee Le Brun and Daughter."

"This beautiful picture reveals marvellously the clinging parasitic type of motherly love, which holds its child so closely as almost to choke it."

Painting by Mme. Vigee Le Brun.



Painting by Greuze

"The Father's Curse."

"The father had the power of condemning his son to life-long disgrace for some trifling escapade. He still possesses the atrocious power of destroying the youth of his son by shutting him up in a house of correction until his majority."

"Spartan Mothers Watching Their Children Flogged."

"In Sparta boys were publicly flogged at the age of eight as a test of courage and the mothers calmly looked on to see that their children bore themselves bravely."

Painting by Herbert Sidney



Painting by Rubens

"Abraham Exiling Hagar and Ishmael."

"The conception of the ancient Hebrew patriarch possessing the power of life and death over his family and children influences us enormously to-day."

energy, but also because sick and incompetent persons will be a burden to the State, which will be obliged to find an asylum for them and support them.

The State must watch over the moral development of its children, in order that they may not be ruined by the errors and the hereditary defects of their families, in heredity that there may not stand between their budding mentality and the collective idea of progress, that static element, that dead weight of family traditions and prejudices, which would check their progress. At present, under our mixed system of education, the parents undo in the evening what the State has done during the day in its schools and colleges of all kinds. The struggle is perpetual and infinitely injurious to the mental stability of the child.

The State ought to take care that every child has the same opportunities of edu-

cation from whatever family they come. It should guide them into callings suitable to their abilities and their tastes, so as to obtain the best work from them. Absolute personal disinterestedness, the attentive indifference of strangers, are alone capable of properly judging, controlling and directing children according to their capacities—that is to say, of putting every one in the right place, where it can produce the most for the greatest good of the nation and the greatest happiness of the individual.

We have no need to prove this by experience. Ancient Greece, to which we are so often obliged to turn to find examples of beauty in those magnificent centuries when physical and moral beauty reached its highest development, created a sublime harmony in education. All the children were taken entirely from their parents in the period of Athenian greatness and sent to the gymnasia.

In another Greek State, Sparta, they carried the system of physical education to its highest perfection. The idea was to make the boy strong, healthy and brave, and neither paternal tyranny nor maternal tenderness was permitted to hinder this purpose.

At the annual festival of the "Diamastigosis" in Sparta, boys of eight underwent a test of courage by being whipped before the altar of Artemis. A recent painting shows us this interesting ceremony with the boy in the middle distance prone on the ground.

The executioner stands over the boy holding a long double switch, and by the altar one of the priests holds up a statuette of the goddess that was supposed to become suddenly heavy if the lashing was not severe enough. The Spartan mother calmly looked on to see that their children bore themselves bravely.

The Ideal Athenian System of Education.

The Athenians combined intellectual with physical perfection in their gymnasia and this should be our aim in education to-day.

The modern State should re-establish these gymnasia and widen their scope. The State should receive all the children of the nation from their birth, care for them as babies in nurseries, and then pass them on to the gymnasia. There they would spend their childhood and their youth. There they would develop freely and harmoniously.

In these gymnasia, situated far from the towns, in a vast open space, in a beautiful country, every branch of education would be included, including sports and instruction, manual, technical, scientific, philosophic and artistic.

The same morality, the same hygiene, the same conception of the nation would form in the gymnasia citizens with homogeneous souls.

A youth, strong, virile, devoid of all sentimentalism, would come out of these institutions, and, beginning with their own generation, raise the intellectual, moral and dynamic level of the nation, which should be the first to apply these principles of rational education. They would place that nation without question at the head of the civilized world.

There exists only one way of realizing the great modern dream of equality, and that is, to make all human beings from birth equal in the treatment they receive from the community. The first step necessary for this is the suppression of the family. Equality for men who are necessarily different can only exist in the form of equality of advantages, and the means of development offered by society.

In brief, "the child of the State" will be the triumph of the individual for the greatest benefit of the community. It will be the logical realization of the great ideal of equality through which alone humanity can become godlike.

duties as a favor, for which the children should be eternally grateful to them.

Then, parents often do the greatest wrong to their children by choosing a calling for them before they are born, instead of waiting until the right career is suggested by their natural aptitudes. In fact, it is not usually in the interests of the child that this choice is made, but most commonly to satisfy the paternal or maternal vanity or the tastes of the parents.

Even when this choice is not a brutal contradiction of the legitimate aspirations of the child, the wishes of the parents continually thwart and confuse its development. These wishes prevail over the aptitudes of the child, and turning him from his true career condemn him to perpetual discontent in an unsuitable walk of life. That is a crime of "lese-individuality."

As humanity only acquires value through the individual, through the greatest possible number of individuals working and creating, the family by lessening the strength of an individual, by the exercise of its legal powers, commits a crime of "lese-humanity."

As against the duties of children toward the family, it is now time to assert their rights.

These rights are more sacred than the family and superannuated rights of the family over the children, because they are important to the future, and the future is more sacred than the past.

It is iniquitous that in a time when love of liberty and hatred of tyranny have overthrown kings and emperors, the tyranny of the family should still exist.

I do not, of course, propose to abandon all control and leave the child to its own instincts.

The child, being in process of formation, cannot know itself, and therefore is incompetent to guide itself. It has only vague and fleeting desires. It must be instructed concerning its own nature and taught to reveal itself.

The child should be developed in accordance with its possibilities. It must be watched and guarded by an awakened mind, eager to discover these possibilities and to help in their expansion. But in no case, not even under pretext of the most stubborn defiance of discipline, should one attempt to enslave the child.

To be a good educator one must put aside one's own character and one's own preferences. One must get out of one's self, in a sense, and throw a mature mind into the soul of the child.

Now, it is impossible for a father who receives his despotic authority by inheritance and finds it enforced by law and custom, to put his child above himself and not below himself. It is impossible for the father not to hold himself up as a model. "Try to be like me, my son," he will always say, in effect.

It is equally impossible for the mother not to see again in her child when it is grown the baby who once had need of her feeble physical protection.

The father has too much power, the mother too much tenderness, for the child that they mentally consider their property.

In reality, to whom does the child belong? If it be the offspring of a race of savages it belongs only to itself.

But when the child is the offspring of a civilized family it should be considered as belonging to the community which has created the civilization in which it is destined to share.

In any case, it never belongs to its parents, who have only done for it what the animals do for their young, what their own parents did for them, i.e., to give them life. For this act the parents deserve neither gratitude nor condemnation.

They certainly do not deserve gratitude for the care and the comfort they may have given to their children. Animals instinctively and naturally sacrifice themselves quite as much as human beings for their young, from whom they

will certainly receive nothing. Those are the facts concerning the physiological domain. As to the instruction and education which parents usually give their children, that is also a normal act, since these things are the creation of the civilization by which the parents themselves have benefited. The latest comers should receive the benefit of all the human labor which has prepared the world for them.

The child owes a debt not to his family, but to the community, to do his share of work for civilization.

On the other hand, parents who count on the help of their children in their old age are perfect egotists. They have no right to claim it as a debt. It is only a charity, like that which the State gives to paupers and sick people.

The State has acquired innumerable rights—moral rights and fiscal rights, the right of law making, the right of punishing and rewarding, the right of life and death, all rights which restrict the liberty of the individual. It has also recognized certain duties toward the poor and the sick and the weak, but it has neglected the most important duty of all—that which it owes to the child.

It controls everything in the lives of the finished individuals who make up the present, and it seems to take little interest in the child, who is the most necessary element of the future.

The State, with us and other countries, has established compulsory instruction, but this means little when the power of education and direction is delegated to the family, which interprets this power according to its egotistic sentiments.

The child represents the future of the community, the element of invention, of creation, of continuation and of growth. It is, therefore, right that the nation should assume the exclusive education of the child.

The State must watch over the physical development of the children, not only because in a healthy body energy is greater than in a weak one, and productive labor is in proportion to this